

A Heaven in a Wild Flower  
by Alessa



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## Chapter 1

When the porter arrived with a message on that frosty October evening of 1867, I can vividly recall how my heart quickened with excitement. I had momentarily lifted my gaze from the daily grind of managing medical records, and the arrival of this message was a welcome interruption. Though I had only crossed paths with the renowned surgeon, Frederick Edwards, once before, the memory of that encounter had left an indelible mark on my soul. To converse with him, even for a brief moment, or to witness his skilled hands at work in the operating theatre, was an adventure that cast a shadow over the routine of life. Despite the many years I had dedicated to working on cases of brain fever and consumption, the memory of that day continues to send delightful shivers through my being. The image of winter sunlight streaming through the hospital windows, casting a golden glow upon the nurses' white uniforms, remains etched in my mind.

"He didn't mention me by name. Could there possibly be a mistake?" I asked, incredulous yet ecstatic, as disbelief and exhilaration coursed through my veins whilst I stood before the hospital superintendent.

"No, it's highly unlikely there is any mistake. I was just speaking with him before you arrived," Mrs. Murphy responded, her stern look softening as her gaze fixed upon me. She was a formidable woman, hailing from Ireland, a distant relative on my mother's side. She possessed the kind of unyielding determination that, in the month since my arrival from London, I had come to realise Northern hospital boards, if not the patients of Aberdeen, seemed to instinctively seek in their nursing staff. From the very beginning, despite her hardness and rigid exterior, she had taken a liking to me—a feeling I hesitate to describe as a mere "fancy," given the impersonal nature of our relationship. After all, it isn't every London nurse, just out of training at St. Thomas, who can boast a kinswoman in the superintendent of Woolmanhill Hospital, even if it were situated in the far reaches of northeast Scotland. Added to this unique advantage was Mrs. Murphy's willingness to impart her wealth of experience, whilst I was eager to soak in the knowledge she had to offer.

"And are you absolutely certain that he intended me?" With bated breath, I leaned in, my curiosity consuming me. The notion was so astounding that I found it difficult to accept.

"He inquired specifically about the nurse who attended Mrs. Wright during her surgery last week. I don't believe he even recalled your name. This isn't London, you see, where nurses are still regarded as

human beings, not mere automatons. When I inquired whether he meant Miss Bennett, he reiterated that he sought the nurse who was with Mrs. Wright. She was small, he said, and cheerful-looking. Admittedly, this description might apply to a couple of others, but none of them were present during Mrs. Wright's procedure. Miss Morgan, the only other nurse besides you who tended to her, is large and heavy."

"Then, I suppose it is really true." My heart raced with anticipation. "And I am to be there at six o'clock?"

"Not a minute later. The day nurse finishes her shift at that hour, and young Miss Edwards is never to be left unattended."

"It's her mental state, isn't it? That's what makes this all the more peculiar, considering I've had so few encounters with cases involving mental disorders and emotional maladies."

"So few cases of any kind," Mrs. Murphy remarked with a smile, and when she smiled, I couldn't help but wonder if her colleagues truly knew her. "By the time you've completed your tenure at Woolmanhill Hospital, Sophie, you will have relinquished more than just your inexperience. I wonder how long you will manage to hold onto your compassion and creativity. In the end, might you not have been a better novelist than a nurse?"

"I can't help but immerse myself in my cases. I suppose one ought not to. Is it wrong of me to do so?" I pondered aloud.

"It's not a matter of what one should do, dear, but rather of what one must do. When you find yourself drained of every ounce of sympathy and enthusiasm, with nothing in return, not even gratitude, you'll come to understand why I attempt to safeguard you from squandering your compassion."

"But surely, in a case like this—for Doctor Edwards?"

"Oh, well, of course—for Doctor Edwards." Mrs. Murphy must have sensed my yearning for insight as I implored her confidence, for, after a pause, she let fall almost carelessly some light on the situation. "It's a terribly sad circumstance, considering what a charming man and accomplished surgeon, Doctor Edwards, is."

Under the starched collar of my uniform, I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. "I've only had the opportunity to speak with him once," I whispered breathlessly, "but he is indeed charming, and, oh, so kind and acquainted with the latest practices, isn't he?"

"His patients hold him in the highest regard."

"Oh, indeed, I've observed that. His visits are eagerly anticipated by all."

Like the patients and the other nurses, I, too, had gradually fallen under the spell of Doctor Edwards. It was a transformation that occurred imperceptibly but with undeniable force. It seemed as though Doctor Edwards had been destined to become a hero to all those he encountered in his work. Fate had handpicked him for this role, and it would have been the height of impudence for any mere mortal to contest the will of the invisible Powers that governed his path. From the very first day I set foot in his

hospital, from the moment when, peering through the half-closed shutters, I witnessed his arrival as he stepped out of the carriage that brought him to the hospital, I harboured no doubt that he had been assigned a grand role in the intricate drama of life. Even if I had been oblivious to the enchantment he cast—unaware of the profound influence he held over the hospital and its occupants—his presence was marked by a palpable and expectant hush, like a collectively held breath. It preceded the authoritative sound of his footfall on the stairs, following his resounding ring at the door.

My initial impression of him, even in the face of the harrowing events that would unfold in the ensuing year, remained a memory that is both careless and splendid. At that precise moment when, peering through the gaps in the hospital shutters, I observed him, clad in his dark fur coat, traversing the pavement dappled with pale streaks of sunshine, I possessed an unshakeable knowledge. It was a prescience beyond any shadow of doubt that my destiny was inextricably intertwined with his in the times to come.

I held this knowledge, I reiterate, despite Mrs. Murphy's persistent belief that my foresight was nothing more than sentimental gleanings from indiscriminate novels. It wasn't rooted in the realm of first love, as impressionable as my kinswoman perceived me to be. It wasn't solely due to his physical appearance, beguiling as it was. Even more than his outward attributes—beyond the resplendent glimmer of his dark eyes, the silvery-brown of his hair, the dusky glow of his countenance—what truly ensnared my heart, even more than his charm and his magnificence, I believe, was the medical expertise and the empathy that resonated in his voice. His voice, I would later hear someone remark, was one that ought always to speak poetry.

So you must understand why I yielded to the call when it arrived, akin to an imperative summons. And if you don't fathom it from the outset, I fear I can never hope to persuade you to believe in impossible things. I couldn't have resisted once he sent for me. Regardless of any initial reluctance I might have felt, I am certain that, in the end, I would have answered his call. In those days, when I still aspired to write novels steeped in romance, I spoke often a great deal about "faith" and "destiny." However, I have since come to realise how frivolous and insubstantial such conversations can be. I suppose it was my "destiny" to become ensnared in the intricate web of Frederick Edwards's deceitful personality. Yet, I am not the first nurse to fall prey to sentimentality and grow impressionable over a doctor who never bestowed her with a second thought.

"I am glad you received the Doctor's summons, Sophie. It may hold a significant advance in your career and mean a great deal to you personally. Just be cautious not to let your emotions carry you away." I can recollect that Mrs. Murphy was holding a sprig of geranium in her hand as she spoke—a patient had gifted it to her from a pot she kept in her room, and the fragrance of the flower remains etched in my memory. Since those days—oh, long since then—I have often wondered if she, too, had been ensnared in Doctor Edwards's deceitful web of lies.

"I wish I had more information about the case," I remarked, making my quest for illumination apparent. "Have you ever encountered Mrs. Edwards?"

"Oh, indeed, my dear. They had been wed for just a little over a year when she met her tragic end, drowning in Brighton during their summer holiday. No one could fathom the terrible circumstances surrounding her untimely demise. Some claimed it was an underwater whirlpool that dragged her beneath the waves, but others dispute this and claim it was an act of providence. However, before this calamity befell them, in those early days, she would occasionally visit the hospital and wait outside while the doctor conducted his rounds. She was such a sweet-looking woman then—so very pretty, fair, and delicate, with the most captivating smile, I dare say, that I have ever beheld. During those initial months, she was so deeply in love that we often chuckled amongst ourselves. Witnessing her face light up as the doctor emerged from the hospital and traversed the pavement to their carriage was like watching a theatrical performance. We never tired of observing her—I wasn't the superintendent back then, so I had more time to peer out of the windows during my day shift. On occasion, she brought her little girl in to visit one of the patients. The child bore such a striking resemblance to her mother that anyone could recognise them as mother and daughter."

I had heard that Mrs. Edwards was a widow with one child when she first encountered the doctor, and I inquired now, still seeking enlightenment that had thus far eluded me. "There was a considerable fortune in the family, was there not?"

"A substantial fortune, indeed," she murmured in quiet contemplation. The subject matter hung in the air like a delicate web, intricately woven with secrets and whispers. "If she hadn't been so captivating, I suppose people might have insinuated that Doctor Edwards married her for her wealth. However," Mrs. Murphy, her brow furrowed with thought, appeared to make an effort of memory, "I've somehow heard that the entire inheritance was placed in trust for the child, little Miss Edwards. Emeline is her name."

The enigma deepened with each revelation, and I found myself entangled in the threads of a perplexing tale. "She is to inherit the fortune only upon her marriage," Mrs. Murphy continued. "I cannot, for the life of me, recall the exact details, but I do know it was a peculiar will, strange in its deliberation, and Doctor Edwards was not to inherit the money unless the child didn't survive to adulthood. The awful pity of it—"

The very notion of such a complex will, entwined with the fate of a child, left a lingering sense of sadness in me. I couldn't help but feel anguish and sorrow for little Emeline, whose life was absorbed by the mysteries that surrounded this peculiar fortune and the lives it touched.

A young nurse came into the office to ask for something—the keys, I think—of the operating room, and Mrs. Murphy broke off inconclusively as she hurried out of the door. I was sorry that she left off just when she did. Poor little Miss Edwards! Perhaps I was too emotional, but even before I saw her, I had begun to feel her solitude and her precarious position after the loss of her mother.

## Chapter 2

My preparations took only a few minutes. In those days, I always kept a suitcase packed and ready for sudden calls, and it was not yet six o'clock when my carriage arrived at Rubislaw Den North, and I stepped outside, stopping for a minute before ascending the steps, to look at the house in which Doctor Edwards lived.

A fine rain was falling, and I remember thinking, as I turned the corner, how depressing the weather must be for young Emeline. It was an old house with damp-looking walls, though that may have been because of the rain. The stately structure appeared to glisten with an air of dignified sombreness in the soft, silver-hued drizzle, its grandeur and opulence undeniable. The ornate wrought-iron gates opened with a deliberate creak, revealing a meticulously tended garden, where withered foliage and yellowed leaves swayed beneath the rain's gentle caress. I couldn't help but marvel at the house's intricate detailing, the elaborately carved woodwork around the windows, and the stained-glass panels that cast colourful patterns upon the grand foyer. As I approached the door, its polished brass knocker and a spindle-shaped iron railing which ran up the stone steps to the black door gleamed even in the muted light. It was impossible not to feel a sense of anticipation when I noticed a dim flicker through the old-fashioned fan-light.

Subsequently, I learned that Mrs. Edwards was born in the very house—her maiden name being Mitchell—and she had never harboured a desire to reside anywhere else. This revelation came to light from Emeline as I grew closer to her. Mrs. Edwards was a woman of strong attachments, both to individuals and to places. Despite Doctor Edwards' attempts to persuade her to move to a more upmarket locale following their marriage, she clung tenaciously to the old Rubislaw residence, in defiance of his wishes. I dare say her obstinacy, despite her gentleness and fervour for the doctor, was a remarkable trait. Women of such sweet, gentle disposition, especially those who have always known affluence, can sometimes be astonishingly headstrong. This personal characteristic often passes on to their offspring. Over the years, I've cared for numerous women and girls with strong affections, so much so that I have come to recognise the type as soon as I set eyes upon it.

My arrival at the residence was met with a slight delay, and upon entering the house, I noticed that the hallway was dimly lit, with only the waning glow of an open fire in the library. When I provided my name and mentioned that I was the night nurse, the servant seemed to deem my presence unworthy of more illumination. He was an elderly family butler, likely inherited from Mrs. Edwards's previous marriage.

To the right of the hall, the gentle glow beckoned me into the library, and as I crossed the threshold with a sense of timidity, I stooped to allow my wet coat to dry in the warmth of the fire's radiance. While I huddled there, fully intent on rising at the very first echo of a footstep, I couldn't help but notice the room's inviting cosiness, especially after the clammy chill of the exterior walls to which some ivy vines clung tenaciously. My gaze was drawn pleasantly to the strange shapes and beguiling forms and patterns that the firelight conjured upon the timeworn Persian rug. I relished this brief respite

when, unexpectedly, the gas lamps of a slowly passing horse-drawn carriage flashed on me through the white drapes at the window. Still momentarily dazzled by the glare, I looked around the room in the dim light.

That was when I saw a child's red rubber ball rolling towards me from the shadowy depths of one of the adjoining rooms. A moment later, while I made a futile attempt to capture the toy as it spun past me, a little girl gracefully flitted into view from the doorway, with step exuding a peculiar lightness and grace. She came to a sudden halt, as if taken aback in surprise by the sight of a stranger.

She was a small child—so slight and dainty that her footsteps made no sound on the polished floor of the threshold. As I observed her, I recall thinking that she possessed the gravest and sweetest little face I had ever seen. Later, I concluded that she could not have been more than ten, perhaps eleven, yet she carried herself with a peculiar, almost prim, dignity, like the gravitas of a person well advanced in years, while she regarded me with enigmatic dark eyes. She wore a simple linen dress, with a hint of red ribbon adorning her blonde hair, which was neatly trimmed with a fringe across her forehead, while cascading into twin braids down her back. Charming as she was, from her curled tresses to the white socks and black slippers on her little feet, I recall most vividly the singular look in her eyes, which appeared in the shifting light to be of an indeterminate dark colour. This gaze seemed to hold an elusive hue, as if it could shift with the changing light. What struck me as the oddest aspect of this look was that it did not resemble the gaze of a child. It conveyed a sense of profound experience, an understanding that carried with it the weight of bitter knowledge.

"Have you come for your ball?" I inquired. But before I could complete the friendly query, I discerned the servant's return. In my haste, I made a second futile attempt to grasp the plaything, which rolled away from me with increased speed into the dusk of the drawing room. Then, as I raised my head, I realised that the child had silently slipped from the room. Without glancing after her, I followed the old butler into the imposing study above, where the distinguished surgeon awaited my arrival.

A decade ago, before the rigours of nursing had extracted so much vitality from me, I was remarkably prone to blushing. As I stepped into Doctor Edwards's study, I was acutely aware that my cheeks had taken on the hue of peonies. Admittedly, I was a fool—no one comprehends this better than I do. However, I had never been alone, even for a fleeting moment, with the illustrious Doctor before. To me, he was more than a hero; he was, without reservation, something almost akin to a deity. At that youthful age, I was enthralled by the marvels of surgery, and Frederick Edwards in the operating room possessed a kind of magic potent enough to bewitch a head older and wiser than mine.

In addition to his formidable reputation and his remarkable skills, I am firmly convinced that he was, even at the age of forty-five, the most splendid-looking man one could envision. Were he to have been discourteous or even overtly impolite, my admiration for him would have remained steadfast. Yet, when he extended his hand and greeted me in the captivating manner he reserved for women, I felt an overwhelming sense of devotion. There is no surprise in the notion that rumours circulated within the hospital, suggesting that every woman he operated on fell in love with him. As for the nurses—well, not a single one of us had managed to elude his enchantment, not even Mrs. Murphy, who could have been scarcely a day under fifty.

"I'm delighted that you could make it, Miss Bennett. You were in attendance with Mrs. Wright last week during my operation?"

I nodded. I would have found it impossible to utter a word without blushing the redder.

"At the time, I noticed your bright face and professional demeanour. I believe brightness is precisely what my stepdaughter requires. Emeline finds her day nurse rather disheartening." His gaze, so kind and gentle, lingered upon me. I've suspected since that he was not entirely oblivious to my adoration. To some men, even a nurse fresh out of training school, no matter how modest, can provide a source of flattery that is not too insignificant to derive pleasure from.

"I'm confident you will give your utmost," he remarked. He hesitated for a moment, just long enough for me to perceive the concern that lay beneath the genial smile on his face, and then he added with a note of gravity, "She is still so very young. We wish, if possible, to avoid sending her away for treatment."

My response was merely a murmur, and after a few carefully chosen words regarding his stepdaughter's illness, he rang the bell and instructed the maid to escort me upstairs to my room. It wasn't until I began ascending the stairs to the third floor that I realised he had provided me with very little information and, in essence, had really told me nothing. I remained just as perplexed about the nature of Miss Edwards's affliction as I had been when I first arrived at the house.

My quarters proved to be quite pleasant. Doctor Edwards had, it seemed, made arrangements for me to stay within the house, and after the austere little bed at the hospital, I was pleasantly surprised by the room the maid led me to. Its cheerful appearance was in stark contrast to my previous accommodations. The walls were adorned with yellow roses, and floral chintz curtains graced the windows, affording a view of a small formal garden situated at the rear of the house. In the dim light, I could hardly make out the outline of the garden, and if the maid hadn't told me, I wouldn't have known there was a marble fountain and an aged elm tree, which, as I later learned, had been planted long before the house was built.

Within ten minutes, I had changed into my uniform and was ready to attend to my patient. Yet, for some inexplicable reason—for which, to this day, I have never been able to uncover an explanation—Miss Edwards adamantly refused to see me. As I stood outside her door, I overheard the day nurse trying to persuade her to let me come in. It wasn't any use, however, and, after futile efforts, I was compelled to return to my room and wait for the poor girl to overcome her reluctance and consent to meet with me. It eventually occurred much later than dinner—in fact, likely closer to eleven than ten o'clock—that Miss Peterson, who was quite worn out by the time, came to fetch me.

"I fear you will have a restless night," she commented as we descended the staircase together. I swiftly discerned that her manner was to anticipate the bleakest outcome in all circumstances and from everyone.

"Does she often keep you up like this?"



"Oh, no, she is usually a sweet child. I've never encountered a more well-behaved and pleasant young lady. However, she continues to be plagued by this delusion. Doctor Edwards calls it her hallucinations..."

Once again, much like the situation with Doctor Edwards, I felt that the explanation had only served to deepen the mystery. Miss Edwards's hallucination, in whatever form it manifested, was evidently a topic of evasion and subterfuge within the household. As a trained nurse, I was well aware that children occasionally exhibit unusual delusions, which were quite natural occurrences in their young minds, but such evanescent conditions never required medical intervention.

I had been on the verge of asking, "What is her hallucination?" But before I could get the words past my lips, we had reached Emeline's door, and Miss Peterson gestured for me to remain silent. As the door cracked open slightly to allow my entry, I noticed that the young patient was already in bed, with the room's lights extinguished, save for a night-lamp that cast a gentle glow on a nearby candle-stand, upon which rested a book and a carafe of water.

"I won't enter inside with you," said Miss Peterson in a whisper, and just as I was about to step over the threshold, I saw the little girl, in the dress of plain linen, slip past me from the dusk of the room into the gas-lit hall. She was the same child I had encountered upon my arrival at the house, the one whose ball I had attempted to retrieve. This time, she held a skipping rope, and as she passed me by, she dropped it in the doorway.

Miss Peterson must have picked up the toy, for when I glanced back a moment later, it had vanished. I remember thinking it was rather late for a child to be awake, especially considering her delicate appearance, but ultimately, it was none of my concern. Four years of experience in a hospital had taught me the wisdom never to meddle in matters that did not pertain to my duties. There is nothing a nurse learns quicker than not to try to put the world to rights in a day.

As I made my way across the room to the chair beside Miss Edwards's bed, she turned onto her side and gazed at me with the sweetest and saddest smile.

"You are the new night nurse," the child said in a gentle voice, and from the moment she spoke, I recognised that there was nothing hysterical or violent about her delusion—or hallucination, as they called it. "They told me your name, but I've forgotten it."

"Bennett—Sophie Bennett," I replied. I felt an instant likeness for her, and I believe she must have sensed it.

"You look younger than my Mom before she passed away, Miss Bennett."

"I'm sorry about your mother, Miss Edwards. I am twenty-two, but I suppose I don't quite appear my age. People often assume I am younger."

For a brief moment, silence hung in the air, and as I settled into the chair beside her bed, I couldn't help but marvel at how strikingly beautiful the little girl looked. This was a classical kind of beauty that somewhat bore a resemblance to the subjects of Renaissance paintings crafted by the old masters. No

older than thirteen, and of small and fragile stature, Emeline possessed a delicate, heart-shaped face that, unbeknownst to me at the time, was going to haunt my memories for the rest of my life. Her skin was extremely pale, as if she hadn't gone out in the sun for many months, and only her round cheeks were graced ever so faintly with a pinkish hue. Her straight, soft hair was as dark as midnight, and her large, grave eyes, set far apart beneath gracefully arched eyebrows, regarded me with unwavering intensity. Yet, what struck me most was the same enigmatic and vaguely wondering expression that I had observed on the face of the little girl I had first encountered in the library upon my arrival at the house.

However, in Emeline's expression, the vague uncertainty underwent a noticeable transformation, evolving into a distinct sense of fear. It was as if a sudden, almost startled horror had momentarily flashed across her delicate features.

In the stillness of the room, I remained quietly seated, and until the time came for Emeline to take her medicine, not a word passed between us. Then, as I leaned over her with the glass of water in hand, she weakly raised her head from the pillow and spoke in a hushed whisper of suppressed resolve, "You look kind, Miss Bennett. I wonder if you could have seen Christina?"

I contemplated her question for a moment, trying to collect my thoughts, and then spoke, "I don't know anyone named Christina, Miss Edwards. Who is this person you speak of?"

"Oh, Christina is the little girl who left the room just before you came in. She is one of our servant's daughters, and she is my friend... My best friend."

Gently sliding my arm beneath the pillow, I attempted to muster a comforting smile for Emeline. "Yes, I've seen her twice already. She was downstairs playing with a ball when I arrived."

A radiant gleam ignited in Emeline's eyes, and I thought how even prettier she must have been before the grip of illness had drained the life and vitality from her body. "Then I know you're a good person," she whispered in a strained, low voice that I could barely discern. "If you weren't good, you couldn't have seen her."

I found her statement quite peculiar, but my response remained composed, "She appeared rather delicate to be sitting up so late."

A tremor coursed through her thin frame, and for a moment, it seemed as though tears were about to well up in her eyes. As she had taken the medicine, I carefully returned the glass to the candle-stand and leaned over the bed to gently sweep her straight, dark hair, which was as fine and soft as spun silk, away from her forehead. There was something about her—something quite indefinable—that stirred an immediate fondness, and dare I say love, within me the moment her eyes met mine.

"Christina always possessed that light and airy way about herself, even though she never experienced a day of illness in her life," Emeline replied calmly after a brief pause. Then, reaching out for my hand, she whispered with a touch of urgency and passion in her voice, "Miss Bennett, you must promise not to tell him—you must not disclose to anyone that you've seen her!"

"I mustn't tell anyone?" Once again, I had the sensation, which had initially struck me in Doctor Edwards's study and later on the staircase with Miss Peterson, that I was searching for a glimmer of understanding amid a sea of obscurity.

"Are you most certain there isn't anyone listening—that there isn't anyone on the other side of the door?" she asked with a troubled expression on her pained little face. She pushed aside my arm and sat up among the pillows.

"Oh, quite, quite certain, Miss Edwards. They have extinguished the lights in the hall."

"And you will not tell him? Promise me that you will not tell him." The vague wonder in her eyes had given way to a startled horror. "He doesn't like her to come back—because he killed her!"

"Because he killed her?" It was in that instant that enlightenment engulfed me in a burst of clarity. So this was Emeline's hallucination! She believed that her little playmate was dead—the same little girl I had seen with my own eyes departing from her room. But not only that, she was convinced that her stepfather, the eminent surgeon whom we all revered in the hospital, had perpetrated the child's murder. No wonder they concealed this dreadful obsession in secrecy! No wonder that even Miss Peterson had not dared to drag the horrid delusion to light! It was the sort of hallucination that one simply couldn't stand having to face.

Emeline continued, her voice slow and measured, while retaining my hand in a grip that would have been painful had her fingers not been so fragile. "There's no point in sharing things that nobody believes. Nobody believes he killed her. Nobody believes she returns to the house every day. Nobody believes—and yet you saw her—"

"Yes, I saw her—but why would your stepfather have killed little Christina?" I spoke with gentleness, as one would address someone in the throes of madness. Yet, I could swear that she was not mad; I was certain of this as I gazed into her eyes.

For a brief moment, she moaned incoherently, as if the horror of her thought were too immense to be put into words.

"Miss Bennett," she began, her voice soft and trembling, "I must confess to you the story that has started all these unforeseen troubles." Here she paused as if reflecting on her words. Her back rested on a pillow in her elegantly adorned bedroom, her eyes downcast as she toyed with the lace handkerchief in her thin, trembling hands. The gentle flicker of candlelight cast a warm glow over the dark mahogany furniture and intricate floral wallpaper, creating an intimate atmosphere that suited her recollection.

With concern and intrigue, I delicately clasped her little hand within my own and spoke softly, "Please, do continue, Miss Edwards. I shall listen with an open heart."

Emeline's gaze flitted to the window, where raindrops gently tapped against the darkened panes of glass. Her voice trembled, and her eyes filled with the sorrow of her memories. "Christina was the daughter to one of our most loyal servants. We grew up together in this house. My earliest memories

are of us playing together in the garden, beneath this very window. We would often amuse ourselves with our dolls, or with a simple game of ball. In the spring and summer months, we would plant a little garden where wild flowers grew. After my Mother passed away, Christina became my sole source of solace. She was my constant companion, never leaving my side, and it was then... It was then during those times that a transformation occurred within me; for Christina, she had captured my heart. From that moment onward, her presence shone like a radiant beacon, illuminating the dimly lit corridors of our household."

Compassionate caregiver being my profession, I gently prodded my young patient, "And how did this concealed love come to endure, my dear?"

Emeline let out a weary sigh, her words heavy with the longing of the past. "It was our secret. Nobody was supposed to find out. Our hidden meetings took place in the deserted corners of the house, far from prying eyes. A stolen glance here, a gentle caress there, and the world around us seemed to fade away."

Her heartfelt confession veiled my heart in sorrow. The memory of my own schoolgirl infatuations with girls in my class still echoed in my mind. I raised an eyebrow and asked, "Were you not afraid of your stepfather's wrath?"

Tears welled in Emeline's eyes as she recalled those harrowing days. "Indeed, my father soon became privy to our transgressions. One late evening, as a storm raged outside, he discovered our hidden refuge within the garden's stone folly. He saw me kiss Christina, and he yelled at us dreadfully." A shiver coursed through Emeline's slender frame as she revisited that fateful night. "He forbade me from ever seeing her again, his voice thundering like the storm itself. He called me vile names and threatened to send me to a wretched children's mental ward if he ever found us together again. But I was not afraid, Miss Bennett. I loved Christina then, and I still love her now."

Leaning closer, I spoke in hushed tones, lest someone was indeed eavesdropping outside the door. "And did you two continue your love in secret?"

Emeline nodded, her voice quivering with determination. "Yes, we did, Miss Bennett, despite the ever-present danger. Christina and I met in secret when no one was around. We concealed our hugs as best we could, and our love only grew stronger with the danger around us and the secrecy of our stolen moments."

The room seemed to grow dimmer as the story unfolded, and Emeline's voice dropped to an urgent whisper. "I loved Christina! I loved her with all my heart and could never let her go, but he found out. One day, he saw me kiss Christina while we were hiding in the attic, and the lightning illuminated the furious anger in his eyes as he caught us in an embrace. The fury in his voice was as relentless as the thunder, and he made Christina cry in fear."

With a heavy heart, Emeline concluded her tale, "He dragged Christina away, her tear-streaked little face begging him to let her go. The next thing I've heard was a frightful tumble down the stairs. It was the last time I ever saw her. They found her at the bottom of the stairs with a broken neck and a

jumping rope wound around her feet. My father claimed she was careless while playing near the stairs, but I knew the truth. It was he who pushed her to her death. It was he who murdered her that night!"

The sudden cold gust of wind against the window shutters reminded me that I had stopped breathing. A shiver ran down my spine. Emeline's words hung heavily in the air, but I quickly collected myself and placed a comforting hand on her trembling shoulder, my eyes misty with sorrow for the poor, wretched child. "Dear Emeline, your tale is a terrible tragedy. If true, it must be told to the authorities. But remember, love, when it finds its way, knows no boundaries, not even those imposed by society. It was a high price you had to pay, and your sacrifices are profound."

The rain continued to patter against the windowpanes, and a sense of unease settled upon me as my mind worked in feverish frenzy. Her accusations, as clear and sound as they were, still resonated with doubt in my heart.

"Tell me," I implored the child. "You mentioned that Doctor Edwards was involved in your mother's death as well. But what could be his motive? For what purpose would he do such thing? Did he not marry your mother? Why would he go to such lengths if there was no love in his heart?"

Emeline's eyes darted towards the window, her voice low and strained. "Because he never loved her! He never loved her!"

"But he married her," I urged gently, stroking her hair as I spoke. "If he didn't loved her, why did he marry her?"

"He wanted her money—my mother's money. He killed her too, and now he's plotting my demise. It all goes to him when I die."

"But he is prosperous in his own right. He must have gained wealth through his medical practice."

"It isn't enough. He wanted millions!" She had grown bitter and tragic. "No, he never loved me or my mother. He loved someone else from the beginning—before he married my mother."

It was evident that reason had no sway over Emeline. If the poor child wasn't delirious, she was in a state of terror and despondency so black that it had almost crossed the border-line into madness. I contemplated the idea of scurrying upstairs to the nursery to fetch little Christina, hoping her presence might provide some solace. However, a moment's reflection led me to the realisation that both Miss Peterson and Doctor Edwards must have long ago attempted these measures without any signs of improvement in Emeline's condition. Clearly, I had no other choice but to offer what comfort and consolation I could, soothing and quieting her until she finally fell into a fitful sleep that stretched well into the morning.

## Chapter 3

By seven o'clock, I was worn out, not from physical exertion but from the emotional strain on my sympathy for little Emeline. My relief came when one of the housemaids brought an early cup of coffee.

Emeline remained asleep, thanks to the mixture of bromide and chloral I had administered. She didn't stir until Miss Peterson arrived for her shift a few hours later. It was then that I made my way downstairs, finding the dining room deserted save for the elderly housekeeper, who was engrossed in examining the silver. Doctor Edwards, she explained to me presently, had his breakfast served in the morning-room on the southern side of the house.

"And little Christina? Does she take her meals in the nursery?" I inquired.

She gave me a startled look, and I couldn't help but wonder if it was tinged with suspicion or concern.

"There is no other child in this household, Miss Bennett, apart from Miss Edwards. Haven't you been informed?"

"Informed? No. But I saw her just yesterday. Her name is Christina, isn't it?"

The look she gave me, I was certain, was filled with such alarm and fear that I regretted my words immediately.

"The little girl, the sweetest child I've ever seen, passed away just two months ago in a tragic accident. Her poor mother, who was our laundress, departed shortly after. She could not bear to remain in the place where her only child died in such tragic circumstances."

I was stunned by this turn of events. "But the little girl... she cannot have died!" I was a fool for voicing this, but the shock had left me completely bewildered. "I tell you, I saw her just yesterday with my own eyes!"

The fear and alarm in her expression only intensified upon this. "That is precisely Miss Edwards's affliction. She believes she still sees the child."

"But don't you see her?" I persisted quite bluntly with my question.

"No," she said, setting her lips in a tight line. "I never see anything unusual in this house."

So it appears I had been mistaken, and the revelation that followed only heightened the fear and unease that had been growing within me. The child was dead. Little Christina had indeed passed away while playing with a jump-rope near the stairway just two months ago. Yet despite this, I had witnessed her presence with my own eyes, playing with a ball in the library, and then I saw her slipping away from Emeline's room, clutching a jump-rope in her hands.

"Is there another child in the house? Perhaps a child belonging to one of the other servants?" A glimmer of understanding began to pierce the fog of confusion enveloping me.

"No, there isn't another child. The doctors attempted to introduce one to poor Miss Edwards once, but it threw her into such a state of delirium that she nearly died of it. Besides, there couldn't possibly be another child as quiet and sweet-looking as Christina. To watch her skip about in her plain little dress used to make me think of a fairy, even though they say that fairies wear nothing but white or green."

"Has anyone else encountered her—the child, I mean? Any of the servants?"

"Only old Archibald, Mrs. Edwards's old family butler, who came with her when she married Doctor Edwards. I've heard that people like him, who have served and lived within a family for a lifetime, often possess a sort of second sight, if you will. They seem to have an innate belief in the supernatural. Archibald is so old and doty—he does nothing more than answer the doorbell and tend to the silver—that nobody pays much heed to anything he might see—"

"Is the child's nursery kept as it once was?"

"Oh, no. The doctor had all the toys sent to the children's hospital. This caused great sorrow for Miss Edwards. She was terribly attached to and deeply emotional about that little girl. But Doctor Edwards believed, and all the nurses concurred, that it was best for her not to preserve the room in the same state as when Christina was alive."

"So Christina was indeed a friend to Miss Edwards? Were they always together?"

"Oh yes, they were adorable together, and always inseparable. Christina was Miss Edward's playmate since they were little. I remember them constantly playing, and talking, and making up stories. However, after the death of her mother, it became a strange obsession of Miss Edwards to always be near little Christina and comfort the child with hugs and kisses. The household servants found themselves disconcerted and uncomfortable by her actions, but their positions afforded no voice in the matter. Finally, Doctor Edwards put a stop to it, but not for long. And then that horrible accident occurred. Ever since then, poor Miss Edwards has been tormented by hallucinations of seeing Christina. It's a sad state of affairs for the whole family."

I pondered whether Miss Edwards's other unsettling obsession had trickled down through the nurses or the servants to the housekeeper, but she remained silent on the matter, and since she was, I suspected, a garrulous person, I surmised it wiser to assume that the gossip had not reached her.

A little later, after breakfast had concluded and I had not yet gone upstairs to my room, I had my inaugural meeting with Doctor Ferguson, the renowned alienist responsible for Miss Edward's case. I had never encountered him before, but almost instantly, upon laying eyes on him, I formed an impression of his character, guided perhaps by intuition.

He was, I suppose, honest enough—I have always granted him that, despite my embittered feelings towards him. It wasn't his fault that he lacked the warmth of human emotion in his mind or that, through long exposure to aberrant phenomena, he had developed the habit of interpreting all human experiences as disorders. He was the type of physician—every nurse will understand what I mean—who instinctively dealt with definitions rather than individuals. He was tall and sombre, with a distinctly rotund visage, and I hadn't been conversing with him for ten minutes before I discerned that

he had been educated in Switzerland and that he had imbibed there the notion of treating every emotion as a manifestation of pathology. I often pondered what he got out of life—indeed, what anyone could find in life—if they had dissected everything down to its bare structural form.

When I reached my room at last, I felt an overwhelming fatigue that rendered my recollection of the questions Doctor Ferguson asked and the instructions he had given me hard to remember. I drifted into sleep, I know, almost as soon as my head touched the pillow. The maid who subsequently arrived to inquire about my luncheon plans wisely decided to permit my nap to continue undisturbed.

In the afternoon, when she returned with a steaming cup of tea, I was still ensconced in a heavy and drowsy fog that would not release my being. Although accustomed to night nursing, I felt as though I had traversed a journey from sunset to daybreak. Still, it was a blessing, I reflected while I drank my tea, that not every case could weigh so heavily on one's emotions as Miss Edwards's hallucinations had done on mine.

Throughout the day, of course, I did not encounter Doctor Edwards. However, at seven o'clock, as I ascended from my early dinner to take over from Miss Peterson, who had extended her duty by an hour, he encountered me in the hall and invited me into his study. Dressed in his evening attire, he appeared even more striking, with a white flower adorning his lapel. I was informed by the housekeeper that he was heading to some public dinner, but then again, he always seemed to be attending some social engagement. That winter, I observed that he seldom dined at home.

"Did Emeline have a restful night?" After closing the door behind us, he posed this question, gracing me with a gentle smile that appeared designed to put me at ease at the outset.

"She slept peacefully after taking her prescribed medication. I administered it at eleven o'clock," I reported.

For a brief moment, he regarded me in silence, and I sensed that his personality and his charm had been focused entirely upon me. It felt as though I stood at the intersection of converging beams of light, so profound was the impact of his presence.

"Did she make any reference to her... her hallucinations?" he asked.

How the warning reached me and what invisible waves of sense-perception transmitted the message, I have never known. While I stood there, confronted by the doctor's imposing presence, an innate intuition cautioned me that the moment had come for me when I must take sides within this household. During my stay, I would need to align myself either with Miss Edwards or against her.

"She conversed in a rational manner," I responded after a brief pause.

"What did she say?"

"She told me how she was feeling, said that she missed her friend, and that she took short daily walks within her room."

His countenance underwent a change, although I could not at first determine the nature of this transformation.



"Have you seen Doctor Ferguson?"

"He visited this morning to give me his instructions."

"He believes her condition has worsened today. He has even suggested the option of sending her to Aberdeen Asylum."

I have never endeavoured, even in the secrecy of my own thoughts, to fully comprehend Doctor Edwards. He may have been sincere. I can only speak of the facts that I know, not those I may believe or imagine, as the human psyche is at times as cryptic, as enigmatic, as the realm of the supernatural.

While he scrutinised me, I felt an internal struggle, akin to opposing forces contending in the recesses of my consciousness. When at last I made my decision, I recognised that it was guided more by an unseen undercurrent of thought than by reason. Indeed, the man had me ensnared while I openly opposed him.

"Doctor Edwards," I raised my gaze directly to his for the first time. "I hold the belief that your stepdaughter is as mentally sound as I am—or as you are."

This statement of open defiance appeared to startle him. "Then she did not talk freely to you?"

"She may be mistaken, emotionally distraught, and tragically troubled in her mind," I emphasised these words as I addressed him, "but she is not—I am prepared to stake my future on this assertion—a genuine patient suitable for an asylum. It would be both unwise and inhuman to send this child to a place from which she will most certainly never come out alive."

"Inhuman, you say?" A troubled look crossed his face, and his voice took on a gentle tone. "You do not believe that I could be inhuman to her?"

"No, I do not believe that." My own voice also had softened.

"We shall leave matters as they stand. Perhaps Doctor Ferguson might have an alternative suggestion to make." He extracted his watch and compared it with the clock—somewhat nervously, I observed, as though the action served as a screen for his disconcertion or bewilderment. "I must take my leave now. We shall revisit this matter in the morning."

However, in the morning we did not speak of it, nor was the subject ever revisited, and during the month I nursed and cared for little Emeline, I was not summoned again to her stepfather's study. On the infrequent occasions when we encountered each other in the hallway or on the staircase, he remained as affable as ever. Nevertheless, beneath his courteous demeanour, I had an enduring sense that he had appraised me on that evening and found no further use for my services.

## Chapter 4

With each passing day, Emeline seemed to regain her strength. Following our initial night together, she never mentioned her little friend to me again, nor did she make even the slightest reference to her grave accusation against her stepfather. She appeared like any other young girl recovering from great sorrow, though she possessed a sweeter and gentler disposition. It is no surprise that everyone who came into her presence adored her, for there was a mysterious loveliness about her, like there is to the mystery of light rather than darkness. She was, I have always thought, as much of an angel as it is possible for a child to be on this earth.

And yet, angelic as she was, there were moments when it seemed to me that she both hated and feared her stepfather. Although he never entered her room while I was present, and I never heard his name on her lips until an hour before the end, I could still discern by the sheer look of terror that overcame her whenever his footsteps echoed down the corridor, that her very soul quivered at his approach.

During the whole month I did not see Christina again, though one night, when I came suddenly into Emeline's room, I found a little garden, such as children make out of pebbles and bits of wood, on the window sill. I kept this discovery to myself, and later, as the maid lowered the window shades, I observed that the miniature garden had inexplicably vanished.

Since that time, I have often wondered if little Christina might remain invisible to everyone but her dearest friend, Emeline. However, there was no way to confirm this theory, as I hadn't the heart to probe her with further questions, especially when she was in such improved health. Her condition had been steadily improving, and things couldn't have been better with her than they were, so much that I had even begun to tell myself that she might soon go out for an airing, when the end came suddenly.

It was a mild November day—the kind of day that brings back memories of autumn days in early winter—and when I came downstairs in the afternoon, I stopped a minute by the window at the end of the hall to look down on the box maze in the garden. There, an ornate water fountain stood as an exquisite marvel in the centre of the gravelled walk, and the water, which had been turned on that morning for Emeline's pleasure, sparkled now like silver as the thin sunlight splashed over it. Its elegant design, a symphony of wrought iron and polished stone, exuded an air of timeless grace, and intricate tendrils of ivy, as if aspiring towards the heavens, crept along its sides.

On this particular day, the air felt unusually mild and springlike for November. As I gazed down at the garden from the window, I thought it would be a wonderful idea to let Emeline enjoy an hour or so basking in the sunshine. During the weeks I had been caring for her, she had grown progressively thinner and ever more pallid. It struck me as strange that she was confined to her room, never allowed to experience a breath of fresh breeze except for the air that filtered through the windows.

Upon entering her room, I discovered that Emeline had no inclination to venture outdoors. Instead, she sat comfortably wrapped in shawls near the open window, which afforded her a view of the garden and its gently flowing fountain. As I stepped in, she looked up from a small book she was reading. A pot of

daffodils adorned the windowsill, for she had a deep affection for flowers, and we made every effort to keep them abundant in her room.

"Do you know what I was reading, Miss Bennett?" She inquired in her soft voice, and then she recited a verse while I approached the candle-stand to measure out a dose of her medication.

"*'To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour.'* That is very beautiful, don't you think so?"

I responded, "Yes," that it was beautiful indeed, and then I suggested that she might enjoy going downstairs for a leisurely stroll in the garden.

"He wouldn't like it," she replied with downcast eyes. It marked the first time she had mentioned her stepfather to me since my initial night at the residence. "He doesn't want me to go out."

I made an attempt to dismiss her apprehension with a lighthearted jest, but my efforts were in vain. After a few minutes, I conceded and turned our conversation to other topics. Even then, it did not dawn on me that her fear of Doctor Edwards was anything beyond a mere fancy. I could sense that she wasn't suffering from a deranged mind. However, I knew that even rational individuals could sometimes harbour unaccountable prejudices. Her aversion to him, I assumed at the time, was a childish whim or dislike. I did not understand then, and I may as well confess this before the end comes—I remain equally perplexed today. I am writing down the events I personally witnessed, and I repeat that I have never leaned in the direction of the mystical or miraculous.

The afternoon slipped away while we conversed. She talked brightly when any subject came up that interested her, and it was the last hour of the day—that grave, tranquil hour when the pulse of life seems to pause and falter for a few precious moments—that brought us the event I had dreaded silently since my first night in the house.

I remember that I had risen to close the window and was leaning out for a breath of the mild evening air when the sounds of footsteps, deliberately hushed in the hall outside, reached my ears. Then, Doctor Ferguson's customary soft knock fell on my ears and, before I could cross the room, the door opened, and the doctor entered, shadowed by Miss Peterson. I was well aware that the day nurse was a stupid woman, but she had never seemed to me so obtuse and enclosed within her professional demeanour as she did in that moment.

"I am glad to see that you have been taking in the fresh air." As Doctor Ferguson approached the window, I couldn't help but ponder what devil of contradictions had made him a distinguished specialist in nervous diseases.

"Who was the other doctor you brought this morning?" asked Emeline in her characteristically grave manner, and that was the sole reference she ever made about the visit of the second alienist.

"Someone who is anxious to aid in your recovery, dear child." He took a seat in a chair beside her and gently patted her thin, soft hand with his gruff fingers. "We are so anxious to cure you that we want to

send you away to the countryside for a fortnight or so. Miss Peterson has come to help you get ready, and I've kept my carriage waiting for you. There couldn't be a nicer day for a little trip, could there?"

The moment had arrived at last. I knew at once what he meant, and so did little Emeline. A wave of colour flowed and ebbed in her porcelain cheeks, and I felt her slender body quiver when I moved from the window and put my arms on her shoulders. I was aware again, as I had been aware that evening in Doctor Edwards's study, of a current of thought that beat from the air around into my brain. Regardless of the consequences it held for my nursing career and my reputation for sanity, I knew that I must obey that invisible warning.

"You are going to take me to an asylum," said Emeline.

With evident embarrassment over his plans being revealed, Doctor Ferguson attempted a feeble denial or evasion, but before he could complete his response, I turned away from Emeline and faced him defiantly. For a nurse, this act amounted to flagrant rebellion, and I was fully aware that it spelled the end of my professional career. Yet, I did not care—I did not hesitate. A force stronger than my own will was driving me on.

"Doctor Ferguson," I implored, "I beg of you—I implore you, please, wait until tomorrow. There are matters I must share with you."

A curious expression passed over his face, and in my heightened state of excitement, I realised he was mentally determining which category to place me in—which classification of morbid manifestations I must be assigned to.

"Very well, very well, we shall hear everything," he replied in a soothing tone, yet I saw his glance shift to Miss Peterson, who went over to the wardrobe to fetch Emeline's brocade coat and bonnet.

Suddenly, without warning, Emeline threw the shawls away from her and rose to her feet. "If you send me away," she declared, "I shall never return. I shall not live to come back!"

The twilight's greyness had just begun, and as she stood there in the dimness of the room, her face gleamed pale and flower-like as the daffodils on the window sill. "I cannot go away!" she cried in a more vehement voice. "I cannot go away from Christina!"

I saw her face with clarity, heard her voice distinctly, and then—such is the overwhelming horror of my recollection—I witnessed the door slowly creak open, and the little girl darted across the room towards her beloved friend. I saw her tiny arms rise, and I watched as Emeline gathered her and enfolded her in a tender embrace. So tenderly their lips touched, so closely locked were they in that passionate embrace, that their forms seemed to meld in the gloom of the surrounding darkness.

"After this, can you have any doubts?" I uttered the words with a fierce intensity, almost savagely, and when I shifted my gaze from the two little girls to Doctor Ferguson and Miss Peterson, I realised, breathlessly, that they were oblivious to Emeline's little friend. Their bewildered expressions revealed the shock of ignorance, not the conviction of understanding. They had perceived nothing beyond

Emeline's empty arms and the swift, erratic gesture she made as if reaching to embrace some phantasmal presence.

I have asked myself since if the power of sympathy enabled me to penetrate the web of material facts and see the spiritual form of the child, for my sight appeared not to be blinded by the preconceived notions and prejudices through which I viewed the world.

"After this, can you doubt?" Doctor Ferguson had flung my words back to me. Was it his fault, poor man, if life had granted him only the eyes of flesh? Was it his fault if he could see only half of the universe before him?

But they couldn't see, and since they couldn't see, I realised that it was futile to attempt an explanation. Within the span of an hour, they took poor Emeline to the asylum. She went quietly, without protest, though when the time came for parting from me, she showed some faint trace of emotion. I remember that at the very last moment, outside, just before she entered the carriage, she raised her little pale face beneath her bonnet and said, "Stay with her, Miss Bennett, for as long as you can. I shall never return."

Tears glistened in her eyes like tiny diamonds when she climbed into the carriage and was taken away, while I stood on the pavement, watching her departure with a sob in my throat. As dreadful as the situation was, I did not, of course, fully comprehend the extent of its horror at that moment. I could not have borne it had I realised the magnitude of the tragedy unfolding before my eyes.

## Chapter 5

The true ghastliness only struck me several months later when word came that Emeline had died in the asylum. I was never informed what her illness was, though I vaguely recall hearing that something was said about "wasting disease"—a loose enough term to hide a convenient death. My own belief is that she succumbed to melancholia and heartache, a victim of the profound sorrow after being parted from her beloved friend for the second time.

To my astonishment, Doctor Edwards requested that I remain as his office nurse even after his stepdaughter went to Aberdeen Asylum. When the news of her tragic demise reached us, there was no suggestion of my departure. Even to this day, I haven't truly understood his motives for retaining me within the household. Perhaps he believed that by keeping me under his roof, he could curtail any gossip from spreading around town. Or perhaps, he may have wanted to test the influence of his charm over me. His vanity was astounding for a man of his stature. I witnessed him flush with delight when passersby recognised and turned to look at him in the streets, and I knew he was not above exploiting the sentimental weaknesses of his patients. Yet he was still the same magnificent figure; there's no denying it. Few men, I imagine, have been the subjects of as many foolish infatuations.

During the following summer, Doctor Edwards embarked on a two-month journey abroad. In his absence, I travelled by railway to visit my parents in London. Upon our return, my workload became

even more demanding as his reputation had grown significantly. My days were crowded with appointments and hurried responses to emergency cases, leaving me with scarcely a spare moment to remember poor Emeline.

Since the afternoon of her departure for the asylum, her little friend had not made an appearance in the house. Gradually, I began to convince myself that the little figure had been a mere optical illusion—a product of shifting lights in the dimness of the old rooms—rather than the apparition I had once perceived it to be. Memories of phantoms tend to fade quickly, particularly when one is immersed in the busy and methodical life that I was thrust into that winter. Perhaps the doctors were correct after all, and the poor child may have genuinely been suffering from a mental disorder. With this perspective on the past, my judgement of Doctor Edwards insensibly changed. I came to the point where I, in all likelihood, exonerated him entirely.

And then, just when he appeared untarnished and splendid in my verdict of him, the subsequent turn of events unfolded so abruptly that I still feel breathless whenever I attempt to relive it in my mind. The sudden violence and upheaval of the next turn in affairs left me with a persistent sense of mental frailty.

It was in the month of May that we received news of little Emeline's untimely death, and exactly a year later, on a mild and fragrant afternoon when daffodils were blooming in patches of the garden around the old fountain, the housekeeper came into the office, where I was engrossed in sifting through some accounts, to bring me tidings of the doctor's approaching marriage.

"It comes as no great surprise," she observed reasonably. "The house must be a lonely place for him. He is a sociable man by nature. But I can't help but feel," she confessed, her words measured as she paused, during which I felt a shiver pass over me, "that it's hard for that other woman to have all the money that was originally meant for Miss Edwards, had she still been alive."

"There is a great deal of money, then?" I questioned with curiosity.

"Oh, a great deal, indeed," she exclaimed, waving her hand as if figures could scarcely do justice to the magnitude of the wealth. "Millions and millions!"

"They will undoubtedly relinquish this house, won't they?"

"That's been done already, my dear. By this time next year, there won't remain a single brick standing. The plan is to demolish it and construct an apartment building in its place."

Once again, I felt a shiver coursing through me. The thought of Emeline's cherished old home crumbling to pieces was something I found too difficult to bear.

"You didn't mention the bride's name," I remarked. "Is she someone he encountered during his time in Europe?"

"Goodness, no! She is the very woman to whom he was engaged before marrying Miss Edwards's mother. However, it was rumoured that she broke off the engagement because he wasn't wealthy enough. Subsequently, she wedded some lord or prince from over the water. But a divorce ensued, and

she has now returned to her former lover. Only this time, it seems he has acquired sufficient wealth to meet the standards, even for her!"

It was all perfectly true, I suppose. It sounded as plausible as a story ripped from the pages of a newspaper. And yet, while the housekeeper relayed the information, I couldn't shake a sinister, nearly imperceptible stillness in the air around me. My nerves were undoubtedly on edge; the abrupt manner in which the housekeeper had delivered her news had left me shaken. However, as I sat there, a distinct impression settled upon me, as if the old house itself were listening—a real, if invisible, eerie presence lurking somewhere in the room or the garden. But when, an instant later, I glanced through the tall window which opened down to the brick terrace, all I could see was the soft sunshine bathing the quiet garden with its maze of boxwood, the marble fountain, and patches of golden daffodils.

The housekeeper had departed—summoned, I believe, by one of the servants—and I was seated at my desk when the words of Emeline, spoken on that final evening, drifted back to me. The daffodils brought her vividly back to my mind, and I pondered, as I watched them so still and golden in the sunshine, how much she would have cherished them. Almost unconsciously, I found myself reciting the verse she had shared with me.

*"To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour."*—and it was precisely at that very moment, while these words graced my lips, that I turned my eyes towards the boxwood maze and saw the child jumping rope along the gravel path leading to the fountain. With perfect clarity, as vivid as the midday sun, I watched Christina approach, her little feet skipping along in what children call a "dancing step" as she gracefully navigated the low boxwood borders to the spot where daffodils bloomed beside the fountain. From her neatly braided golden hair to the frock of plain linen and her little feet, clad in white socks and black slippers, nimbly hopping over the twirling rope, she was as real to me as the very ground upon which she trod or the marble fountain bathed in splashing water.

In a sudden rush of urgency, I sprang from my chair and took a single stride towards the terrace. If only I could reach her, if only I could speak to her, I believed that I might at last solve the mystery and find out what had happened in this house. However, with my first call, with the first flutter of my dress on the terrace, the ethereal little cherub seemed to dissolve into the twilight of the maze. Not a breath stirred the daffodils, not a shadow passed over the sparkling flow of the water.

Weak and trembling in every fibre of my being, I lowered myself onto the brick step of the terrace, my emotions overwhelming me as tears streamed from my eyes. Deep within, I must have sensed that some terrible event loomed on the horizon, even before they pulled down Emeline's home.

That evening, the doctor was absent from dinner. The housekeeper informed me that he was in the company of the lady he was going to marry, and it must have been near midnight when I heard him return, using his latch-key to enter the house and ascend the staircase. Unable to sleep, I had remained on the ground floor, and the book I had been reading earlier that day in the office still beckoned to me. I can't quite recall its title—it had seemed to me very exciting when I began reading it in the morning,

but after the mysterious visitation from the little girl with the skipping rope, the romantic novel now seemed as dull as a discourse on the art of nursing.

The words on the pages eluded my focus, and I was on the verge of abandoning the book and retiring to bed. Then, as I listened to Doctor Edwards' steady footsteps ascending the stairs, I found myself repeating the same mantra over and over in my mind: "There can't be a bit of truth in it." And yet, though I assured myself that there couldn't be a bit of truth in it, I shrank with an eerie sensation as I contemplated going through the house to reach my room on the third floor.

I was tired out after a demanding day, and my nerves must have reacted morbidly to a heightened sensitivity in the face of the encroaching silence and the darkness. For the very first time in my life, I grappled with the fear of the unknown, the dread of the invisible. While I bent over my book, illuminated by the warm glow of the gaslight, I became acutely aware that I had strained my senses, listening intently for any sound within the vast emptiness of the rooms overhead. The silence was nearly unbearable, and the enveloping darkness seemed to press upon my fear, making every slight noise take on an eerie significance.

Just as I was struggling to break free from this oppressive sense of foreboding, the clatter of a passing horse-drawn carriage on the street jolted me back to reality. The sudden, familiar sound was a welcome reprieve from the intense hush of expectancy, and I exhaled a sigh of relief that swept over me as I turned my attention to the book, trying to fix my distracted mind on its pages.

I remained seated there, still struggling to regain my composure, when a household servant escorted a messenger into my presence. This courier presented a message from the superintendent with what seemed to my overwrought nerves a startling abruptness. The message informed me with urgency that Doctor Edwards was required at the hospital.

By that time, I had grown accustomed to receiving such emergency messages during the night, and I swiftly dispatched a note to the doctor, who was in his study, and heard his lively response in the distance. He had yet to retire for the night, he said, and would come down immediately while I ordered back his carriage, which must just have reached the coach yard.

"I'll be with you in five minutes!" he called as cheerfully as if I had summoned him to his wedding.

I heard his steps resonate across the floor of his room, and even before he could approach the head of the staircase, I rushed to open the door and enter the hall in order that I might light the gaslight and have his hat and coat waiting. The gaslight stood at the far end of the hallway, and as I moved toward it, guided by the dim glow from the landing above, my eyes were instinctively drawn to the staircase. It stretched upwards, veiled in sombre shadows, its slender mahogany balustrade tracing the ascent to the third story. At that very moment, as Doctor Edwards gaily hummed his quick descent down the steps, the horrific event transpired.

It was at that precise moment that I distinctly saw—and I would solemnly attest to this on my deathbed—a child's skipping rope lying loosely coiled, as if it had slipped from the grasp of a careless little hand, nestled in the curve of the staircase.



I sprang forward to reach the gaslight and cast the light throughout the hall. As I did so, while my arm was still outstretched behind me, I heard the doctor's carefree humming abruptly transform into a cry of astonishment or terror. The figure on the staircase faltered and stumbled, desperately reaching out with groping hands into the empty air.

The warning scream lodged in my throat as I witnessed Doctor Edwards pitch forward and tumble down the lengthy flight of stairs, crashing to the floor at my feet. Even before I knelt beside him, before I wiped away the blood from his brow and felt for the silent pulse of life, I knew in my heart that he had departed this world.

Aghast at the turn of the event, I raised my head to call for help, and it was in that moment that I beheld little Christina reflected in the large hall mirror affixed to the wall. Her sad, eternally serious eyes gazed upon me with the faintest of smiles gracing her cherubic face, as if to say that all was well now, and she had found peace at last.

When I turned to look behind me, she had vanished as swiftly as a fleeting shadow. Only a solitary, yellow daffodil remained on the floor, the last reminder of her fleeting presence in this world.

To this day, the world at large believes it to have been a misstep in the darkness of the night, or it may have been, as I am willing to bear witness, a phantasmal judgement. Perhaps it was little Christina herself, or even Emeline's spirit—something had killed him at the very moment when he most wanted to live.

But in the end, whatever it was, I was certain a judgement was served by providence on that night to right the wrong—the wrong he dispensed so callously on two innocent souls at the cusp of their own happiness.

The End